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SUBJECT: CODEL FRIST MEETING WITH FM LAVROV

(U) Sensitive but unclassified; handle accordingly.

¶1. (SBU) Summary. Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist (R-TN) and Senators Judd Gregg (R-NH) and Richard Burr (R-NC), accompanied by Ambassador Burns, met April 10 for with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to discuss current bilateral and multilateral issues. On Iran, Lavrov warned that Russia would not support threatening Tehran with Security Council sanctions, and said raising issues like human rights and Iranian support for terrorism in the UNSC would "guarantee that Iran will never respond positively." On dealing with Hamas, he said Russia got no answer when it asked what gameplan the U.S. was following in insisting on a no-contacts policy. He said it was not clear what coalition would be formed in Ukraine, but stressed the importance of close Russian-Ukrainian relations. On Georgia, he said President Saakashvili's anti-Russian rhetoric made relations difficult, and warned against demands for a withdrawal of Russian peacekeepers or any recourse to force. In Central Asia, concerns for stability should rule out democratization steps that did not respect local traditions.

¶2. (SBU) Lavrov said the U.S.-Russia bilateral relationship was critical to world stability and was built on firm foundations. He complained, however, about "unfair" criticism and "double standards" on the U.S. side. He objected to Assistant Secretary Lowenkron's reference to an "erosion of democracy" in Russia, saying that under Yeltsin the pendulum had swung so far in one direction that tough measures had been needed to restore some balance. Russia had been a democracy for only 15 years, and a trial-and-error search for the right way to proceed would continue for some time. The U.S. was applying different standards to Russia's WTO application than had been applied to Ukraine. He said the GOR favored a joint U.S.-Russian initiative at the G-8 Summit in St. Petersburg concerning nuclear energy and security. End Summary.

Iran

¶3. (SBU) Senator Frist said press reporting in the U.S. on Iran had taken on a life of its own, and Russia might be unclear about what U.S. intentions towards Iran were. The sense in the Senate was that the U.S. did not intend to resolve the Iranian problem through the use of force. Lavrov said Russia had been engaged in intense discussions on Iran with the U.S., Europe and China, and discussions would continue, but the common path that had been pursued to date might not hold. Russia would not support threatening Iran with UNSC sanctions. Unfortunately, when Washington said it wanted collective action on an issue, it often simply wanted the world to support whatever the U.S. had already decided to do. There should be engagement before the U.S. made final decisions about what had to be done; such consultations "would not involve a loss of face." When problems were truly global, only a genuinely global response would be effective

¶4. (SBU) There were now indications, Lavrov continued, that the Iran scenario was developing along the same lines as the Iraq scenario had several years ago. Secretary Rice had said in Berlin that the UNSC should address not only the Iranian nuclear program, but also such issues as terrorism and human rights. "That would guarantee that Iran will never respond positively," Lavrov said, and it invited a confrontation. Senator Burr stressed the need for the U.S., Russia, and other states to cooperate to find a stable solution.

Hamas

¶5. (SBU) Lavrov said Hamas had been democratically elected and now formed the Palestinian Authority's government. If the plan was to "suffocate its funding" and hope the Hamas government would fall, what was the strategy? If there were new elections, Hamas would win even a larger percentage of the vote. Or it might turn away from engaging in democratic politics, or Israel might try to resolve the issue through a "sweeping operation." Pursuing such options would be very short-sighted. When the U.S. said there should be "no" contact with Hamas, Russia wanted to know what the U.S. gameplan was, but it got no answer. Fortunately, the Quartet would again be meeting to discuss the situation.

Relations with Russia's Neighbors

¶6. (SBU) Lavrov said Moscow sometimes had the impression that "the worse a CIS country treats Russia, the better its relations are with Washington." The number of democratic

MOSCOW 00003751 002 OF 004

countries around the world had increased over the past decade, but the road to democracy differed in each case. No single model was applicable universally. People did not pursue democracy for its own sake, but for the stability and security it can bring. In Central Asia, however, any "color revolution" could easily lead to an Islamist revolution that, with the region's artificial borders, could bring widespread harm, and Russia was closer to the problem than the U.S. "The current governments are at least a barrier to an Islamist revolution," and other countries should respect the traditions of the people and their stage of historical development, and avoid actions that would destabilize the region. He suggested following a model as in the Broader Middle East, where "we are not telling them what to do."

¶7. (SBU) On Ukraine, Lavrov said the GOR wished the Ukrainians well in forming a coalition. There were many options, but it seemed most would not be very sustainable. Probably no government would have a clear mandate, and the country's problems would remain unsolved. Russia wanted a stable and Russia-friendly Ukraine that made its own decisions about what it should do. He could not see, however, how any democratic Ukrainian government could ignore the historic links (families, economic ties) to Russia.

¶8. (SBU) Similarly, Russia wanted friendly relations with Georgia. That was hard, however, when President Saakashvili publicly claimed, e.g., that Russia had blown up pipelines on its own territory to harm Georgia, even as Russian specialists were working at 25 degrees below zero to repair the lines. Saakashvili thought he could be successful through the use of anti-Russian rhetoric. Russia was withdrawing from its bases in Georgia, and was on schedule in that withdrawal. It could not agree, however, that all decisions about South Ossetia and Abkhazia should be taken in Tbilisi, or that Russian peacekeepers should be withdrawn. The Georgian government could make its choices, but it should understand that "the peacekeepers are the reason why those conflicts are called 'frozen.' If the peacekeepers go, they will again become very hot conflicts."

¶9. (SBU) Tbilisi was building up its arms, Lavrov said, "in quantities that make no sense unless they plan to take military action." South Ossetia was the more dangerous of the two conflicts, since Georgian and Ossetian villages were intermingled in a patchwork with no clear dividing lines. In Abkhazia there was a river that divided most of Abkhazia from Georgia. The GOR was working directly with Tbilisi, but also with the U.S. and the Europeans, to try to make sure the Georgians do not try to solve those problems through force. Full use should be made of the existing mechanisms for resolving the conflicts, and there recently had been a positive decision to have a working group on South Ossetia put together a course of action drawing on both Georgian and South Ossetia peace plans.

¶10. (SBU) Saakashvili had vowed he would "reunify" Georgia by the end of his Presidency, Lavrov noted. While speaking of giving South Ossetia and Abkhazia more autonomy, however, he never used the word "federation" -- much less "confederation," a term Shevardnadze had used. Moreover, the Ossetians and Abkhaz saw how much autonomy Ajaria was granted when it was reincorporated into Georgia, and judged Saakashvili on that basis.

Bilateral Relations

¶11. (SBU) Lavrov said U.S.-Russian relations were built on very solid foundations, and their progress was overseen through the Presidential Checklist mechanism that was functioning quite well. The relationship was critical to world stability in its security, terrorism, and economic dimensions, "although our yearly trade figures are like your monthly trade figures with China." In general, the bilateral relationship was positive, but Russia could not ignore the "manner" in which concerns about Russia are now being raised in the U.S. Moscow welcomed serious discussion of real problems, and the major changes to NGO legislation made because of Council of Europe recommendations proved that Russia took international views into account. But the way in which criticism of Russia was being made indicated that some in the U.S. wanted to "put us out of balance and to make life more difficult for us." When the Soviet Union collapsed, the West had said the world needed a strong Russia, not a weak one. "Now Russia is strong, and some people don't like it." Russia accepted that it is a competitor in a competitive world, but the competition should be fair.

¶12. (SBU) Continuing on the theme of "unfair" criticism, Lavrov cited a recent description by Assistant Secretary

MOSCOW 00003751 003 OF 004

Lowenkron of the situation in Russia as an "erosion of democracy" and calls by members of Congress for both keeping Russia out of the WTO and keeping Jackson-Vanik restrictions in place until high intellectual property rights standards are reached. Russia saw "double standards" at work in such instances. "We don't try to look better than we are," Lavrov said, "but there is no 'erosion of democracy' here." Under Yeltsin the pendulum had swung so far in one direction that tough measures were needed to restore some balance. Russia has been a democracy for only 15 years, and a trial-and-error search for the right way to proceed would continue for some time. Everything the government would do, however, would be consistent with the Russian constitution.

¶13. (SBU) Russia understood that reports from private centers like Human Rights Watch were not official statements, Lavrov said, but the State Department report on human rights in Russia also included questionable material, e.g., an assertion that women in Russia felt uncomfortable because of the absence of a law punishing sexual harassment. People in Russia saw that kind of criticism as "showing a desire to bite us for anything, and even for nothing." Russia's adoption of proportional representation and the elimination

of gubernatorial elections were standard practice in many European countries; why were they acceptable there but not in Russia? The U.S. used an indirect system for Presidential elections that twice had resulted in the election of a President who had received fewer votes than his opponent. If the U.S. wanted to question Russian practices, it would have to accept Russia discussing American practices.

¶14. (SBU) Senator Frist welcomed the opportunity to exchange views with Lavrov. He understood Lavrov's point about the pendulum in Russia swinging back from where it had been during the Yeltsin years, but many in the U.S. saw, e.g., restrictions on freedom of the press and were unclear about where Russia's leaders wanted the country to be in five years. Lavrov did not respond directly to that question.

¶15. (SBU) IPR protections, Lavrov said, were much worse in Ukraine than in Russia, and the GOR had taken not only legislative but also enforcement actions to address the problem that do exist. Frist said the U.S. recognized that Russia had made some progress on IPR, but there was still a long way to go. Senator Gregg noted that IPR experience with China led many to believe we should not rely simply on paper commitments. Lavrov responded that IPR was a complicated issue with many aspects that were now being discussed by experts. Russia did not claim it had resolved all existing problems, but much progress had been made. Senator Burr said it was a difficult issue, and the U.S. interest lay in finding an outcome that would be fair and equitable for all concerned. "We want a global economy that includes Russia."

Nunn-Lugar, Terrorism, Nuclear Issues

¶16. (SBU) Lavrov said the Nunn-Lugar Program had provided Russia critical support at the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union, particularly with regard to the transfer of nuclear weapons from Ukraine, Belarus and Kazakhstan, and it still played an important role in today's different circumstances. It was anomalous, however, that only 30 percent of the Nunn-Lugar funding for Russia was actually spent for equipment and services in Russia, while 70 percent went to U.S. contractors. That was the lowest level of funding reaching Russia among all the programs of the G-8 Global Partnership. With European contributions, Lavrov said, the proportion was reversed, with about 70 percent of funding actually getting to Russia.

¶17. (SBU) Lavrov thanked Frist for having co-sponsored the Senate's resolution in 2004 on Beslan. He raised the issue of Ilyas Akhmadov, who was granted political asylum in the U.S. despite evidence submitted by the GOR showing that he had committed terrorist crimes for which he should be extradited to Russia. Lavrov hoped U.S. legislators would not lose sight of the Akhmadov issue.

¶18. (SBU) Lavrov said the GOR favored a joint U.S.-Russian initiative at the G-8 Summit in St. Petersburg concerning nuclear energy and security. Such an initiative would be in the spirit of the Global Nuclear Energy Partnership, which both President Bush and President Putin support. Lavrov noted Putin's support for the creation of nuclear fuel cycle facilities under the control of the IAEA in a few international centers that would make nuclear fuel available to all NPT members.

¶19. (SBU) In opening remarks, Lavrov stressed the importance of parliamentary exchanges, noting that Federation Council

MOSCOW 00003751 004 OF 004

President Mironov had been received in Washington when he visited there in 2003 and that both houses of our parliaments were pursuing contacts. He also expressed condolences to constituents of Senator Frist affected by recent natural disasters in Tennessee.

¶20. (U) CODEL Frist did not have an opportunity to clear this cable before departing Moscow.

BURNS